



Service Center NEWS

If it matters to you, it matters to us!

U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Food and Agriculture Council

May/June 1999

Comment Card System Changing

Representatives from USDAs three county based agencies in six pilot states met in Washington February 9-10 with the Quality Customer Service Team to review findings from the pilot tests of the Comment and Complaint System. Employees from Arizona, Connecticut, Idaho, Indiana, Rhode Island, and South Carolina represented Rural Development, Farm Service Agency, and Natural Resources Conservation Service in helping refine the customer feedback system.

The Comment and Complaint System is designed to be a customer-defined, service quality feedback system that provides USDAs customers with a convenient and trustworthy method to communicate concerns, problems, and recommendations to USDA. The system also tracks information from customers, provides for quick feedback on their concerns, and is used to make improvements in USDAs response to their needs.

After six months of operation, the pilot states and the Quality Customer Service Team shared information on what worked and what didn't. It identified components of an ideal system for customers that has potential for nationwide implementation.

Several important findings have been identified:

—USDA employees in the pilot states support the system.

—The comment card materials and display should be redesigned to be more recognizable to the customer for what they are and what they do, to encourage the customer to pick up the materials should they want to provide feedback to USDA.

—Alternate formats were desired that might be more effective and would cut costs; a postcard, for example, rather than a first class

self mail response that would provide the same or better information.

—A response card that permits the customer to choose either a survey style response or to elaborate on his or her comments was suggested as being more flexible to the needs of various customers.

—USDA customers like having the option of using a toll-free number to call with their comments and concerns or to follow-up on a previously mailed card.

—Some customers suggested looking at Internet-based feedback system through state or USDA websites that would capture the comments and still provide for response by the respective state.

—Technical issues included different ways of capturing information provided by customers, how to categorizing comments in a way that is most useful in using the information, and

changes in computer software that will improve the way customer comments are captured, tracked, and reported.

The Quality Customer Service Team has enlisted USDAs Office of Communications Design Division to begin working on improvements to the printed materials, and webmasters in the partner agencies have been contacted to help work out a way to provide customers with the ability to respond to the comment system via the Internet. Shortly, information about a nationwide system will be shared with unions, employee associations, and conservation partners to get their input. A draft directive and a nationwide implementation plan will then be prepared.

The draft materials and implementation plan will be submitted to the National Food and Agriculture Council for approval. Nationwide implementation is targeted for the spring of 2000, or earlier in some states, possibly beginning in fall 1999.



Rural Development, Farm Service Agency, and Natural Resources Conservation Service employees from Arizona, Idaho, Indiana, Connecticut, Rhode Island, and South Carolina help refine the customer feedback system in Washington, D.C. on February 9-10, 1999.

Message from the Chair

I am looking forward to spending this year as Chair of the National Food and Agriculture Council (NFAC). This is an important time for USDA. I believe we are at a crossroads. We are all having to do more with fewer resources. No one knows that challenge better than those of you working in the county based agencies. I want to thank each of you for your dedication and cooperative spirit as we move through important changes to the way we do business.

I also want to recognize the effort that goes on in the Service Centers—the delivery mechanism that we all work to support. In these offices and at other service delivery points, USDA's employees and partners work diligently every day to make our help available to each and every program eligible individual. I know that each of you share my commitment to continue to reach out to traditionally underserved communities and deliver our programs to these communities.

Keith Kelly's efforts as Chair of the NFAC resulted in a great deal of progress over the last year, and his work has helped lay the ground-

work for much of what we're doing today. In addition, the entire NFAC board has shown its resolve to work through the difficult decisions that have been made—and will be made this year—all with the perspective of what's ultimately good for our employees and our customers.

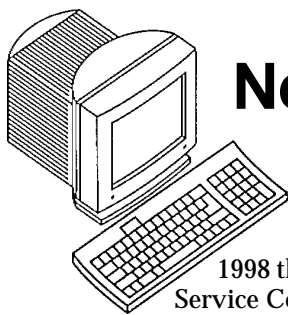
Much has been accomplished. We will soon reach the initial planned target of 2,567 Service Centers delivering USDA services in the field. Currently, we're less than 140 offices away from meeting that target. Through hard work and dedication, the NFAC has guided the county based agencies through much progress, many difficult decisions, and significant change. Looking at the future, there's more to come, but I'm confident that we can make the needed changes and still deliver the best quality customer service possible.

One change will be the creation of the Support Services Bureau (SSB) that will manage the administrative side of the field delivery effort. This task will support the program delivery efforts of the three principal partner agencies—Natural Resources Conservation Service, Farm Service

Agency, and Rural Development. Coordinating our work with the SSB will be an interesting challenge, but one that one that will eventually lead to greater efficiency, more consistency, and better service to our employees across the three agencies. In addition, we will be looking at bringing more focus and cooperation to our outreach efforts, making sure that every eligible program participant has full accessibility to USDA programs.

These are just some of the issues that NFAC will be working on this year, some old and some new challenges. Ultimately, the challenge we will face together is an old one—delivering quality service to our customers, ensuring efficiency and effectiveness for the taxpayer, and working well together with these common goals in mind. It is a challenge that USDA employees have met with extraordinary success in the past, and I am confident we will do equally well in the future.

Inga Smulkstys
Chair
National Food and Agriculture
Council



New Computers Deployed to Field

At the end of Fiscal Year 1998 the USDA Service Center agencies purchased 15,188 desktop and 1,291 laptop computers for deployment to the field. The first deliveries are occurring now, and final deployment of the equipment is expected to be completed by August.

The workstations were purchased with the dual objectives of (1) replacing computers that are not Year 2000 compliant, and (2) initiating the first phase of providing an integrated, common computing environment for the agencies. Additional phases of the Common Computing Environment project will build on this investment to expand the availability of these

common computer systems to all employees of the three county based partner agencies.

The computers will support business activities as part of the Service Center implementation effort that include:

- common applications that will support Administrative Convergence in the areas of Human Resources Management, Automated Directives, Travel, and the Automated Purchase Card System,

- common office automation tools available to the three agencies to allow sharing of information, training, and support,

- improved communications between the partner agencies through common electronic mail services, and

- common, interchangeable computer platforms on which to begin fielding reengineered business processes and applications currently under development.

The purchase of these computers was done in a single procurement which resulted in considerable savings. It is estimated that the consolidated purchase saved over \$1000 each for the desktops and over \$1500 each for the laptops, as compared to single unit pricing.

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USDA Service Center Skills Training for Everyone

Three years ago Farm Service Agency, Rural Development, Natural Resources Conservation Service employees and their many partners working in USDA Service Centers were introduced to a new training; USDA Service Center Skills: Working Together for Customers. The training equips employees with the skills to deal with the many changes needed to support the service center concept. Most importantly, the training is designed to put customers at ease when conducting business at USDA Service Centers.

The Service Center training also reinforces the strong commitment to serving all customers with respect and dignity, includes identification of internal barriers to working together across agency lines, and barriers to providing extraordinary customer service.

Some twenty-three thousand Service Center employees in the field have received this training. "This is believed to be the largest training effort of its kind in the Federal Government," said Kathy Huey, Team Leader for Change Management/Training. "The participants sent back many positive comments about the training itself, and how they enjoyed being in a learning environment with their colleagues from the other agencies.

Evaluations from participants consistently expressed the opinion that headquarters and national office, regional, and state office employees should get the same training so that all employees serve their internal and external customers in the same manner. The National Food and Agriculture Council agreed with these observations. USDA Skills: Working Together for Customers training is now required of all employees in the Service Center Partner agencies.

The training was planned after looking at the evaluations of the field employees of the three county based agencies. These evaluations pointed out that field staff want state office, regional, and headquarters/national office employees to treat them as customers, using the same customer service skills the Service Center employees learned in the Working Together for Customers training.

State office, regional, and headquarters/national office employees are not usually on the front line serving the rural customer, however the work they perform, such as developing policies, will ultimately have a direct impact on those customers. As a result, a training module dealing with internal customer service was included, and the case studies used in the program were changed to reflect actions that might happen in state, regional and headquarters/national offices.

"These changes enhance an already excellent training program," Huey said. "The rest of the training stayed the same as that delivered to Service Center employees—including all three full days of training. The first day on Thriving Through Change, is as important now as it was when the

Service Center concept was introduced as employees are now dealing with the changes brought about by administrative convergence."

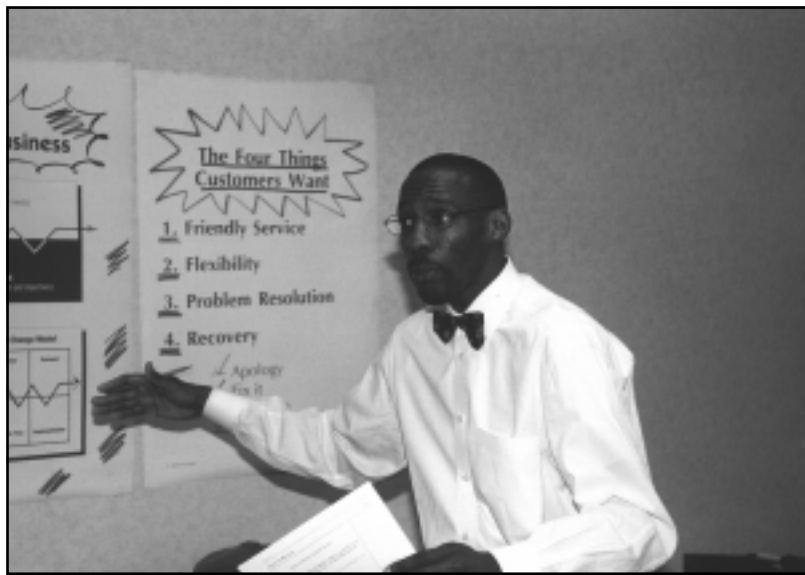
The training still asks for barriers to working together and providing excellent customer service. This is an area where there is a lot of work to accomplish. "We have not forgotten about the barriers we have collected from employees in the service centers," Huey said. "We are currently testing software which will input all the data we received into a data base. From there we will sort the data into groups and refer the data, when applicable, to the appropriate Business Process Reengineering team or directly to the National FAC."

"We currently do a cursory review of the barriers when they are received, and so far we have seen some reoccurring themes," Huey said. "They are items such as, the computers systems are outdated and incompatible and information cannot be shared."

A post evaluation of the training is planned which will involve calling service center employees to find out whether they are using the skills learned in the training, the impact of the training, and some of the successes in dealing with external customers

and colleagues. "This will also be a good opportunity to say a resounding thank you to all the Service Center training coordinators and facilitators," Huey said. "They spent many hours preparing for this training and ensuring that it was a Positive Memorable Customer Experience (PMCE) for all participants."

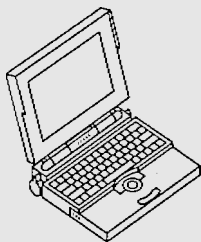
Some successes have already resulted from the training. Many employees in Service Centers already work together, yet the training opened the door to increased dialogue between agencies—dialogue that didn't always happen before the training.



Raymond Bell, from the Farm Service Agency, a Headquarters Facilitator for the "USDA Skills: Working Together for Customers" training, explains the four things USDA's customers expect from a service organization: friendly service; flexibility; problem resolution, and; recovery. The three day training that more than 23,000 USDA Service Center employees have taken is now mandatory for all management and staff in the Service Center partner agencies.

The computers purchased all conform to the same specifications and come with Microsoft Windows NT Workstation and Microsoft Office 97 Professional already installed. Both configurations come with full three-year warranties for on-site service including parts and labor.

A single system configuration software has been prepared and distributed to state Information Technology staffs on a CD-ROM for installation on all of the computers so that the initial setup will be the same on all 16, 479 systems. The CD-ROM will expedite the configuration and installation of the computer systems and assure that each is the same no matter where it is installed. Common commercial and agency software applications currently in use are included. Backup and communications services are also being provided, using existing agency computer systems to provide those services. Use of the CD-ROM will reduce the setup time for the computers from several hours to less than 30 minutes for each system.



Desktop Specifications

Compaq DeskPro EP: 400 MHZ Pentium II w/Ethernet NIC, 64 MB RAM, 6.4 GB IDE HDD, 17" monitor, 2X AGP graphics controller w/8 MB video memory, 14/32x CD-ROM, sound card, internal speakers

Laptops with Docking Stations

Dell Latitude Cpi266XT: 266 MHZ Pentium II, 64 MB RAM, 4.3 GB HDD, 13.3" active matrix LCD, 20X CD ROM, 56KBS modem. Docking station with: Ethernet NIC, serial, parallel, video, keyboard, and mouse ports, and monitor stand; monitor, keyboard, and mouse

Using the single configuration, field staff will be able to establish their own user profile that will be linked to the specific computer programs that are used by the agency that each employee works for. Multiple user profiles can be created on any one of the computers, thus allowing individuals from each of the agencies to share the new equipment, while using computer programs from their own agencies.

A team approach will be used to coordinate the deployment of the new computers that will rely on the individual partner agencies information technology support organizations, while following a state-by-state plan developed by the partner agencies working together and approved by the National Food and Agriculture Council. Working as teams at the local, state, and national level, the three organizations will manage the deployment from a common perspective, and result in the implementation of these systems in a single support framework.

Using the common national Help Desk structure that has been established for the agencies, a team has been organized that will provide assistance to the states in addressing any problems that arise during the delivery and installation of the equipment. States that encounter problems in meeting the goals and schedules that are outlined in their plans will be provided with assistance in solving those problems following the national delivery schedule.

Another multi-agency team assessed training needs and identified training materials that have been purchased nationally for use by the states in training both information technology support personnel and other employees. A receiving and deployment inventory system has been developed that is integrated with the National Food and Agriculture Council's Office Information Profile system. It meets the needs of each agency, simplifies the record keeping that will be required for the management of these systems, and can provide up-to-date information on the status of deployment activities across the country.

Within the context of the above objectives and working as a team, the state IT support staffs for the partner agencies have developed Deployment Plans for their state. These plans specify the sites and schedules for delivery of the new systems as well as any local configuration activities that need to be accomplished. The delivery schedule is described in the plan, based upon the capability of the staff to handle the quantities and work associated with installing, training, and supporting the new equipment. The state plans were consolidated into a National Deployment Plan that was approved by the USDA CIO on March 1, 1999.

Additional computers will be purchased in Fiscal Year 1999 to complete replacement of non-year 2000 compliant systems remaining in the three agencies. The additional computer systems will be operational by the end of September to meet the Office of Management and Budget's Year 2000 compliance requirements.

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